

BBC Radio-4 "Start the Week" (15th May, 2006)

Sulayman Al-Bassam interview with Andrew Marr

(other guests include Frank Gardner)

A.M: Speaking of corruption & unelected regimes, lets press the rewind button, many centuries ago and go back to around 750 A.D. and to Baghdad and Basra at the time of the Abbasid Revolution which would produce some fantastic flowering of Arab-Muslim culture.

Sulayman Al-Bassam's play "Mirror For Princes" written in English, being performed in London at the moment is a history fables, it seemed to be a little bit like an early Shakespeare history play in the sense that, although it's apparently about long ago events, it's really producing or intended to produce contemporary reactions.

SAB: Absolutely, the play is set in 750, in Iraq, around the building of the city of Baghdad. The Abbasid Revolution that replaced the Ummayyad dynasty at the time gave birth to a paradigm change for the expanding Arab-Islamic world. The Muslim empire began to draw in very varied strains of ethnic from the Persians to various other ethnic elements into the expanding Muslim empire. The capital of the Islamic world was moved at that time from Damascus to Baghdad. It's a period that was extremely rich, it was an effervescent period full of ideas, full of thirst and hunger for knowledge, it was a period that was to establish and lay the template for 4 centuries of the Abbasid Dynasty.

A.M: But also violent, revolutionary, despotic?

SAB: Indeed, to some extent. There were major issues of power and questions of power and power politics that were being played out in the region at the time.

One of the major rulers of that time was Abu Jaffer Al-Mansoor, the man who established and built Baghdad in a record 4 years.

A.M: A perfectly circular sort of new town?

SAB: Yes: An image of the sassanian universe actually, again another reflection of the Persian influence upon aspects of Islamic Architecture and thinking at the time. It was a circular city that was about 10 miles wide and in the dead centre there was a palace and a mosque. It was, I'm sure, a very awe inspiring thing and was intended to be so, so that anyone who was approaching the Calipha would be filled with a sense of awe.

The play that I've written focuses on the life and times of the writer.

A.M: Yes, tell us about him.

SAB: This chap, Abdulla Ibn Al-Muqaffa, was of Persian origin, a polymath versed in Indian languages, Greek, Arabic, who converted to Islam from having been a Manichaien. One of the fascinating things about this period is the pluralism that so characterized the Islamic Society of that day. There were Zoroastrians, Manichaiens, Chritain Gnostics, Jews, all manner of different beliefs & ethnic currents and Ibn Al-Muqaffa typified, he epitomized the top end of that sort of pluralism. He was a scribe, he was extremely erudite.

A.M: You called him at one point the Voltaire of his day? A devout Voltaire?

SAB: Yes, absolutely, he was a very politically minded writer; he was also a firm believer.

A.M: And his main work, I mean, the thing which he is still remembered in the Arab world right from children upwards are these fables.

SAB: These fables "Kalila Wa Dimna", they are stories of, the trials and tribulations of animals within the animal kingdom, ruled and governed by the lion, and the fables are both anecdotes but they are also forms of political council and this is really where

A.M: A combination of Aesop & Machiavelli, all in the same story.

SAB: With Orwellian aspects too. In the sense, a very early "Animal farm".

SAB: It was Ibn Al-Muqaffa's relationship with power, being a court scribe, being brought into the Abbasid Court and his attempts to council power and reform the nature of power that really led me into the heart of the contemporary metaphor that I was looking to develop.

A.M: He comes from an extremely unpleasant end, it has to be said. But tell us what you hope Muslim-Arab audiences will take from this play.

SAB: Ibn Al-Muqaffa is a symbol to this day of the intellectual becoming a martyr coming into confrontation with power, maintaining, standing by this belief and coming to a filthy end.

However, he is also a symbol to my mind (and this is what I have tried to approach in this play) of a disappearing world in

which pluralism and the ideas of tolerance that he very much stood for were gradually and systematically eradicated in favor of a discourse of extremism.

A.M: Why did you write the play in English and not in Arabic?

SAB: One of the issues that I was trying to address through this play is also the question of Empire. Empire in the play is seen through Islamic eyes, through the expanding Islamic empire. However, today, we have Empire being played out in with very different discourse, in a very different language. Empire today and Iraq today is once again the theatre of the birth pains and death rows-perhaps-of Empire. And in a sense, I'm writing a theatrical fable that is both about the Arab World 1300 years ago but is also about the relationship of the Arab World with the west today.

A.M: Frank, I think you've translated or studied at least part of the original Mirror for Princes, the collection of fables.....?

Frank

Gardner: We did, although I must admit that I groaned when I heard it, because of course it was homework for us, we had to translate the whole thing and "Oh no! I've only done 4 pages so far out of sort of x hundred!"

But it's a fantastic play; I mean I've read the script. I'm sorry to say that I haven't seen it yet, but I mean its just so witty and fast moving and with lots of modern vernacular in it which I think will play extremely well to a western audience and I'm sure to an Arab audience in Arabic as well.

A.M: It has got Arabic surtitles hasn't it?

SAB: Yes, it carries Arabic surtitles.

A.M: An Odd thought!

SAB: As Frank has mentioned, the political turbulence that exists in the middle-east comes into play for dramatists or makers of culture in a very real way. Culture and politics are bed fellows in the Middle-East wherever you go. A subject like this, that is Empire today, Iraq today or even the Abbasid line and a dramatic analysis of the descendants of the Prophet Mohammed etc. means that one has to look for a language of metaphor. In exactly the same way that Shakespeare feared the Lord Chamberlain, writers in the Arab world and culture makers do have many things to be wary of, therefore a language of metaphor is something that's very valuable.

Frank

Gardner: I have to say, I think, it's a very brave work you have done here Sulayman. Because there are many people in the Middle-East unfortunately who do not want to examine these kinds of issues who see it through a very narrow vision and who do not like sensitive ideas being discussed. Some people who really consider that the only true way was the time of the four prophets who immediately follow the Prophet Moh'd.

A.M: Although history is irrelevant here..

Frank

Gardner: In a way, it's all gone horribly wrong since then and we should all return to that time. Islam brought many many good things to a region that had many things going wrong with it. But I think

it's so important to discuss these things, to bring them out into the open. And one of the things which is sadly lacking in the Arab world is a sort of self analysis, a public self analysis, so I welcome this play.